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FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9946

INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS PRIORITY

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2376

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 8039

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 6223

RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 0453

RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 7651

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000384

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, NSC FOR WALTON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/16/2020

TAGS: PREL PGOV TH

SUBJECT: THAILAND: BANGKOK ON EDGE FOLLOWING BOMB SCARE,  
GRENADE EXPLOSION

REF: BANGKOK 00362 (EAP DAS MARCIEL ENGAGES RED-SHIRT  
LEADERS)

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Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE, REASON 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: With Bangkok already tense following weeks of small-scale anti-government protests, two bombing incidents over the weekend served to further heighten anxieties in Thailand's capital. Late in the evening on February 13, a grenade exploded at a college near Government House with no casualties reported. Early the next morning, authorities safely neutralized a bomb planted on the grounds of the Supreme Court. Given the targets involved, as well as the fact that both incidents took place with less than two weeks remaining until the February 26 Supreme Court verdict in former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's assets case, speculation about possible perpetrators focused almost immediately on violent elements associated with the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD, or "red-shirts"). RTG authorities announced they did not have any solid leads in either case, while UDD officials denied involvement in either incident. Meanwhile, the UDD declared that it would not stage a major rally before the February 26 court date, while the government -- leaving nothing to chance -- nevertheless took steps to increase security at key locations throughout Bangkok.

¶2. (C) Comment: In all likelihood, the levels of tension and rhetoric will continue to rise in the lead-up to the February 26 court decision. While red shirt core leaders have explicitly renounced violence as a tactic on the one hand, Thaksin's recent Dubai summit with red shirt agitators such as Seh Daeng raised legitimate questions about the movement's true intentions moving forward. Regardless of who actually carried out the attempted attacks over the weekend, the mere fact that a powerful bomb was placed directly in front of the Supreme Court less than two weeks before that same Court renders a verdict in Thaksin's assets case will only raise more questions and further heighten tensions. End Summary and Comment.

ACCUSATIONS, DENIALS ABOUND

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¶3. (C) Police reported that an M-79 grenade exploded at a

technical college adjacent to Government House late at night on February 13. No one was harmed by the explosion, which authorities claimed was directed at Government House rather than the school. Pol. Lt. Colonel Kumton Aaiucharon, Chief of the EOD unit, said the M-79 appeared to be launched at the Rajmangla University of Technology, but the perpetrators could have just been incapable and untrained and intended it for the Government House. The following day, security forces found and disarmed a device containing 2.5 pounds of C-4 explosive on the grounds of the Supreme Court. The device was wired to a Casio F20 digital wrist watch, a small 12-volt battery, and a detonation cap, according to Pol. Lt. Colonel Kumton. It was found at the rear inner fence of the Supreme Court, not near the building. Had the device detonated, there could have been serious injuries or deaths if people were near. There were 2 safety switches on the bomb and they do not appear to have been set to "on," however. Police said this could again be lack of skill or just a symbolic gesture by whoever put the bomb together to demonstrate that they have real explosives. There were no claims of responsibility for either incident.

¶4. (SBU) Most of the public speculation about the two incidents hewed closely to two basic theories: either the red-shirts were trying to bully the government and judiciary prior to the February 26 verdict in Thaksin's case, or the government itself was the perpetrator and was trying to blame the UDD. The latter theory, according to red-shirt supporters, created a pretext to increase security measures and lock down the red-shirts before the so-called "final confrontation," a long awaited and repeatedly delayed mass rally designed to dissolve the current government. RTG authorities announced that they had no leads in either case at this stage.

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¶5. (C) Thaksin's attorney, Noppadon Pattana, denied that the fugitive former prime minister had anything to do with either incident. Similarly, key red-shirt agitator MGEN Khattiya Sawasdiphol -- better known as Seh Daeng -- likewise denied any involvement in either event, claiming that if he had been behind either incident, he would have announced it before carrying it out. Sunai Phasuk, a researcher for Human Rights Watch, told us he was convinced that people connected to Thaksin were responsible for the bombs, and added that the government would definitely use the attempted attacks to try and discredit the UDD.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: UP SECURITY, BUT NO ISA...YET

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¶6. (SBU) Meanwhile, the government responded to the weekend's events by putting security forces on a higher level of alert and setting up checkpoints and police patrols in key parts of Bangkok. Following a meeting of key security officials, including Deputy Prime Minister for security affairs Suthep Thaugsuban and Army commander GEN Anupong Paochinda, the RTG announced that it would not yet invoke the Internal Security Act (ISA), following a determination that the heightened security measures would suffice for the time being. Security officials also agreed to establish a committee chaired by DPM Suthep to monitor events and quickly implement necessary measures for as long as events warranted.

UDD TO HOLD OFF ON PROTEST

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¶7. (SBU) Consistent with the message the UDD's top strategist Veera Musigapong relayed to us on February 10 (REFTEL), core leader Jatuporn Promphan told protestors assembled in front of the Election Commission on February 15 that the UDD would not organize a formal rally before or on February 26, a message Veera reiterated on February 16. Individuals, however, had the right to demonstrate on that date, both UDD figures said. Meanwhile, Jatuporn claimed to have a document

proving that the government intended to instigate violence at the next rally, and promised to reveal the contents of the document to the public on February 16. DPM Suthep said the government was prepared to deal with expected protests as the court date approached, but he denied the RTG had any plans to provoke anti-government demonstrators.

JOHN